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CONGO: Boom in the Jungle

In the Belgian Congo last week massed tom-tom drummers practiced a welcome tattoo. Prosperous Negro shopkeepers climbed up wooden ladders and draped the Congolese flag (a golden star on a blue field) from lampposts and triumphal arches set up along Boulevard Albert I, the spanking concrete highway that bisects the capital city of Leopoldville. In far-off mission churches, encircled by the rain forest that stretches through Belgian territory from the Atlantic to the Mountains of the Moon, choirs of Bantu children rehearsed the Te Deum. African regiments drilled, jazz bands blared in the bush, and on the great brown river that drains the middle of the continent Negro captains tooted the raucous steam whistles on their swiftly gliding paddle boats.

The toots and Te Deums were all in preparation for the arrival this week of the slim, spectacled young man who is King of the Belgians and, as such, the sovereign lord of 14 million Congolese. It will be his first state visit to his African Empire.

The Congo is King Baudouin's richest, widest realm. It is eighty times the size of the mother country, and half again as populous. Booming Congo exports provide the dollars and pounds that make the Belgian franc one of the world's hardest currencies. Belgians drink Congo coffee, wear shirts made of Congo cotton, wash them with soap made from Congo palm kernels. Without the mighty Congo, little Belgium might go broke; with it, a nation of 9,000,000 still counts as a world empire.

Middle Way. The Belgians are determined to hang on to their African treasure house. The task may not always be easy. The Congo lies between the all-black Gold Coast, where 4,500,000 Negroes are close to independence under Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah, and unhappy South Africa, where Boer Prime Minister Johannes Strydom seems determined to enslave 9,000,000 Negroes for the benefit of 2,500,000 whites. Caught between, both geographically and psychologically, the Belgians are contemptuous of both black and white "extremes." They fear that South Africa's apartheid may spark race disorders that could spread north; that Nkrumah's black nationalism could get out of hand and spread the dread cry southward: "White man, get out."

The Belgians like to feel that they have devised "a middle way," making possible black-white partnership. Their program is: full speed ahead in economics and education, dead slow in politics.

So far, the evidence is that the Belgian way is working. The Congo, under hard-working capitalism, has become a tropical cornucopia in the heart of a poverty-stricken continent.

Giants & Pygmies. The Congo supplies the U.S. with well over half the uranium produced in the non-Communist world; it also mines and exports 75% of the free world's cobalt (essential for jet aircraft engines), 70% of the industrial diamonds. One third the size of the U.S., it is a hot, humid, fecund basin drained by a river system second only to the Amazon in volume. In the east lies Ruanda-Urundi, where the seven-foot Watussi live; in the south lies Katanga, the metalliferous wonderland that fronts on Rhodesia and is the site of Shinkolobwe, the world's richest uranium mine. Between is the timeless jungle (48% of the Congo is forested), with beetles the size of pigeons, dwarf antelope no bigger than terriers, bearded Pygmies with humplike buttocks who hunt the rare okapi (half antelope, half giraffe).

To Novelist Joseph Conrad, the Congo River was "an immense snake uncoiled" curving through "joyless sunshine into the heart of darkness." There was plenty of darkness in the Congo during the 19th century "scramble for Africa," when Baudoin's great-granduncle, Leopold II staked out his monarchical claim to the uncharted Congo Free State. Leopold's rubber gatherers tortured, maimed and slaughtered until at the turn of the century, the conscience of the Western world forced Brussels to call a halt.

Brains & Muscle. Today, all has changed. Nowhere in Africa is the Bantu so well fed and housed, so productive and so content as he is in the Belgian Congo.

In little more than a generation of intense economic effort, the Belgians have injected 20 centuries of Western mechanical progress into a Stone Age wilderness. The results are staggering: in forests, where 50 years ago there were no roads because the wheel was unknown, no schools because there was no alphabet, no peace because there was neither the will nor the means to enforce it, the sons of cannibals now mine the raw materials of the Atomic Age.

Belgian brains and Bantu muscle have thrust back the forest and checked the dread diseases (yaws, sleeping sickness, malaria) which sapped the Bantu's strength. In some areas, the Congo's infant-mortality rate is down to 60 per 1,000—better than Italy's figure. More than 1,000,000 children attend primary and secondary schools—40% of the school-age population (compared with less than 10% in the French empire).

The Belgians taught the Bantu to run bulldozers, looms and furnaces, to rivet ships, drive taxis and trucks. Girls with grotesque tribal markings etched into their ebony foreheads sell in shops, teach in schools, nurse in hospitals. Already thousands of natives in the Congo's bustling cities earn \$100-\$150 a month—more than most workers in Europe, and small fortunes by African standards. They buy sewing machines, phonographs and bicycles in such profusion that Sears, Roebuck has recently put out a special Congo

catalogue.

Tears in Africa. The Belgians compare the Congo with the state of Texas, though in fact the Congo is bigger and far richer in its natural resources. The Congo's gross national product has tripled since 1939. Money is plentiful. Belgian investors take more than \$50 million a year in dividends alone. Once the Congo depended exclusively on mining and farming; today it manufactures ships, shoes, cigarettes, chemicals, explosives and photographic film. With its immense reserves of hydroelectric power (a fifth of the world's total), the Belgians expect the Congo to become "the processing plant for all Africa."

The Congo boom makes its cities grow like well-nourished bamboo shoots. In six years the Negro population of Elisabethville has jumped from 40,000 to 120,000, Costermansville from 7,000 to 25,000, Stanleyville from 25,000 to 48,000. But the pride of the Congo is Leopoldville (pop. 370,000), a bustling, modern metropolis that is spreading along the south bank of Stanley Pool (see map).

Black & White Leo. Leo, as the Belgians call it, has tripled its population in the past six years. Its 20,000 whites live apart in a suburb that seems far too big for them. There are broad, empty boulevards and a scattering of modern skyscrapers, but the buildings seem isolated amid the mango palms and yellow-flowered cassia trees where the red-tailed parrots roost. Many streets are unpaved and unlighted; in heavy rain they turn to quagmires. Leo's whites are mostly officials or highly trained business executives—managers, engineers, sales agents. They are a hardworking, hard-drinking crew, and they have plenty of money to spend on oysters. Scottish salmon and French wine, served in Leo's nightclubs. The Belgians drive American cars, particularly Buicks, and wear colorful combinations of sun helmet, khaki shirt, pink shorts, bright green woolen socks and beige suede shoes. "They have two kinds of conversation," gibes an English-born resident of Leo. "One is an offer, the other a counter-offer."

Adjoining "white Leo" is the teeming "native town," known to the Negroes as Le Beige. Without its 350,000 Africans, Leopoldville would crumble in the tropical sun. Each morning, thousands of Negroes bicycle into downtown Leo to work in the shipyards and offices. Evenings, they stream homeward to the jumble of shacks, tenements, modern homes and tastefully built hospitals that make up "black Leo." In the darkness, millions of candles glow under the mango trees where Negro market women do a roaring trade in bread, beer and dried fish, green-and-brown-striped caterpillars (a delicacy when fried in deep fat) and blackened lumps of elephant meat.

Primitivism and progress, magic and machinery, go hand in hand in Le Beige. A government helicopter sprays the town with DDT to keep away mosquitoes, but many of the Negroes put far more faith in "charms." There are swimming pools, tennis courts and night schools, but many of those who use them still believe in witchcraft.

Little Léo. The Belgian attitude is that these things will only change slowly. It is an attitude that is shared by the three big institutions which run Congo life: the state, which is absolute (no one has a vote in the Congo);

the big corporations, which control one-third of the land area and at least half the Negro workers; and the Roman Catholic Church, which maintains the Congo's schools and most of its hospitals. The state is Governor General Léo Pétillon, 52, a diminutive Belgian barrister who stands but 5 ft. 3 in. in his epauleted white uniform. Known as the "Little Lion" to the 5,000 Belgian civil servants who govern the Congo on his orders, Pétillon has an actor's mobile face, slow limpid speech, and graceful white hands which more often than not gesticulate with a lighted Camel to emphasize a point. An old Africa hand, he is guided by a motto like that of his predecessors: *Dominer pour Servir*—dominate to serve.

Paternalism. Pétillon stands for "paternalisme," the policy which the Belgians openly proclaim as the secret of their success in the Congo. "The African under stands paternalism." says the Governor with conviction. "It was he who invented it." In the Congo, paternalism means bread but no votes, good government but no opposition; the best Negro housing in Africa but no real freedom of movement. "The emphasis is on economics," says Governor Pétillon. "The fascination of becoming a skilled worker handling precision machinery drives out of the Negro's mind the need for politics."

The Congo has excellent roads because the rural population is compelled to labor on them; it is developing scientific agriculture by forcing peasant farmers to grow minimum quotas of cotton, and jailing them for failure to deliver. Each Negro city dweller is fingerprinted and must carry a plastic identity card attached to his tax receipt. Yet the Congo is one of the few places in Africa where there is practically no racial tension.

"This is black man's country," says Governor Pétillon. Before a white man may buy Congo land, he must prove to the government that no native is using it, and that it will not be needed for native settlement.

Big Five. Most whites work for the big corporations that are responsible for the Congo's boom. The corporations operate hand in glove with the government, through a series of interlocking cartels, of which the biggest (60% of all Congo business) is named, with eloquent simplicity. *La Société Générale*.

The Union Minière du Haute-Katanga (UMHK) has a concession of 13,000 sq. mi., larger than Belgium itself. It pays its principal stockholder, the government, \$50 million a year in taxes, its private investors \$25 million. Then there is Huilever, which has a palm-oil concession of more than 4,000,000 acres.

All told, five big companies control about 90% of the Congo's capital investment. They treat their Bantu workers with the same assiduous paternalism shown by the Congo state. For its 63,000 black dependents, the Union Minière furnishes attractive brick bungalows and good schools, prenatal care and milk for mothers and children, medals for the men who excel at their work in the mines. "This is capitalism as it works in the Congo," said one industrialist proudly.

Christian Missionaries. But the Congo is also run by Christian missionaries, who in most cases got there first. Of the Congo's 14 million Africans, 4,700,000 are baptized Roman Catholics (the rest are almost all pagan). The Roman Catholic Church maintains 678 medical centers, 16,500 primary, 103 secondary and 171

technical schools.

The churchmen are more aware than the government or the corporations that the half-educated African, stirred by the white man's literature and moved by his religion, cannot always be satisfied by bread and machines alone. The Congolese, or those among them who have climbed fastest from darkness to light, are slowly starting to talk about such verboten things as self-rule and democracy. Their stirrings are not enough to disturb the massive calm of the Belgian administration, or impede the spectacular advance of the Congo economy, but they are perceptible. To some Belgians they are alarming. Says a top-ranking Congo official: "What would the Negroes do with votes? Votes mean Communism."

Small Voice. To most of the hard-headed businessmen who run the Congo government, the signs of a Negro awakening present not a danger but a challenge. "Once advance has begun, you cannot stop it, on any front," says Economist Henri Cornélis, Pétillon's deputy and almost certain successor. The Brussels Cabinet agrees, and the result is that the Congo government is getting ready to give the Congolese a small voice in the colony's affairs. Some time next year, if present plans are carried out, the literate Africans in the principal Congo cities (15% of the total native population) will vote alongside the whites for panels of urban councilmen, who will advise the local prefects.

The Belgians plan to move slowly—and progress steadily. "We adapt and adjust continually to the Congo's circumstances," says Governor Pétillon. "In the cities perhaps we shall move towards the ordinary concept of democracy, for black and white alike, but in the countryside, we may have to be content for a long time with a modified form of tribalism."

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